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JOHN FISKE

BY

THOMAS SERGEANT PERRY







*John Fiske.*

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OF  
Eminent Americans  
Edited by  
H. A. De Wolfe Howe



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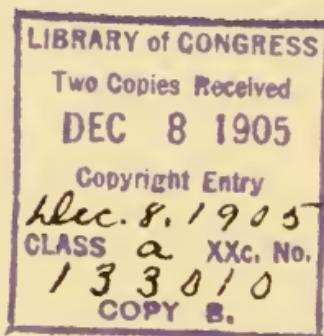
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JOHN FISKE



## JOHN FISKE.

### I.

THE life of a man of letters is like a voyage: that is the most successful in which the least happens. Other men we study in their actions, but the philosopher is at his best in contemplating the vicissitudes of others rather than in meeting thrilling adventures of his own. Like the majority of mankind, the writer lives in a corner remote from exceptional events, studying life as it is reflected in books; and his biography is not a list of heroic deeds. When others are conquering savage races or, more probably, watching the whirling incidents of the stock exchange, he is quietly reading the printed page. Yet no man has lived even this inglorious life without at least abundant opportunity to show various virtues,—endurance, persistence; and even a writer's life may not be without its lesson and encourage-

ment for others. The life of a man like John Fiske certainly has its place in the history of the intellect. The part that he took in unfolding modern thought to his fellow-countrymen was of distinct significance ; and, although newly won truths become as uninteresting as a solved puzzle and soon fade into platitudes, the way they were won is, perhaps, not without interest. It will be well if other generations have for their leaders men as sincere, as honest, and as learned as John Fiske.

The task which he essayed was to teach the principle of evolution. He was one of the first to grasp the meaning of this movement, which was of so great importance in widening men's interests and in enlarging their view of the universe ; and he devoted himself to teaching the new doctrine with great enthusiasm. Like every new doctrine, this one met with opposition. It was felt that the spirit which preached

that things grow was an irreverent and basely destructive perversion of the belief that things were created. It seemed to be a wicked assault upon the privileges of omnipotence. Modern history is made up of these misunderstandings. One year, it is Copernicanism ; another, geology makes trouble. After evolution comes what is called the higher criticism, and there is no peace ; and we avenge ourselves for the discomfort of being made to think by abusing the man who introduces the new thoughts, and Fiske did not escape this common lot. In comparison with the discomfort of the thumb-screw, the foolish tattle of the ignorant or even the insolent interference of the wise is of course as nothing ; but he tasted the modern, civilized form of persecution in misunderstanding and abuse, though this was but an incident in his life. Before he died, he had become one of the most widely known men in America and one of the most highly

esteemed. His career was a successful one, in intellectual matters at least, and his life seemed still full of promise up to the moment of its close. By what steps did he attain this honourable prominence?

John Fiske was born in Hartford, Connecticut, March 30, 1842. His father, Edmund Brewster Green, of Delaware, was a newspaper editor in Hartford, New York, and finally in Panama where he died in 1852. He was descended from some Philadelphia Quakers. On his mother's side he was descended from a Puritan family, the Fiskes, who emigrated from Suffolk to Massachusetts in 1641, and went to Connecticut in 1693. The name given to him was Edmund Fiske Green, but on the occasion of Mrs. Green's second marriage to the late Edwin W. Stoughton he took the name of his great-grandfather, John Fiske. Before he was a year old, he was taken to Middle-

town, Connecticut, and there he lived in the family of his grandmother Fiske until he entered Harvard College in 1860. He was the only child in the house, and the surroundings were possibly very sedate ; but there was a supply of solid books, and with these he made friends as soon as he had learned to read. "At seven he had read Rollin, Josephus, and Goldsmith's *Greece*. Before he was eight, he had read the whole of *Shakespeare*, a good deal of *Milton*, *Bunyan*, and *Pope*. By eleven he had read *Gibbon*, *Robertson*, *Prescott*, and most of *Froissart*. He was very fond of drawing maps, and read history with maps almost from the first." So much Mr. Edwin D. Mead tells us in one of his interesting articles in the *Christian Register* for 1888.

It was not history alone that he read with maps of his own make ; he drew with extreme pains a map of *Christian's Progress* as recounted by *Bunyan*. In a

word, he must have been most distinctly what is vaguely called an old-fashioned child. “He committed hundreds of dates to memory for the pleasure of getting subjects fixed in his mind in an orderly way. At eleven he wrote from memory a chronological table from B.C. 1000 to A.D. 1820, filling a quarto blank book of sixty pages. He mentions in his essay on ‘The Causes of Persecution’ that he recollects coming to blows, when quite a little boy, with a schoolmate over the question whether Napoleon really won the battle of Eylau. . . . History and mathematics were his first loves. He began algebra at eight, and by thirteen had gone through Euclid, plane and spherical trigonometry, surveying and navigation and analytic geometry, and well into the differential calculus.” These facts which Mr. Mead chronicles came straight from Fiske’s lips, so that they are practically a bit of autobiography,—indeed, all that we

have. They show on what solid foundations his learning rested, and how early and zealously he began his lifelong task of study. The foundations, too, were broad as well as deep. He began the study of Latin at six, and at seven was reading Cæsar. "At thirteen he had read the whole of Virgil, Horace, Tacitus, Sallust, and Suetonius, and much of Livy, Cicero, Ovid, Catullus, and Juvenal. He began Greek at nine, and at twelve had read most of the *Collectanea Græca Majora* with the aid of Schrevelius's lexicon, which defines the Greek in Latin."

This lexicon he found meagre and confusing, and he longed for the Liddell and Scott which more efficiently smoothed the path of the student; but its price, five dollars, seemed to his prudent grandmother a monstrous one to give for so useless a luxury, and she declined to pay it. The young lover of learning accordingly set forth to earn the money

for himself. “He learned that an Irishman in the neighbourhood would buy old bones at 37 cents a barrel. So he picked up bones here and there until he had got five barrels, which brought him \$1.85. In other ways he increased this fund to \$3.40, when his grandmother, seeing his determination, furnished the remainder of the \$5,” and thus he became the happy owner of the lexicon.

A certain amount of Latin and Greek had to be read by all boys at that time who were intending to go to college, but this modest amount Fiske had far exceeded from sheer love of study ; and to these acquirements he added the knowledge of many modern languages. He learned by himself German, French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese. “He began Hebrew at seventeen, and took up Sanskrit the next year. During his college years he added Icelandic, Gothic, Danish, Swedish, Dutch, and

Roumanian, and made a beginning in Russian." With these acquisitions he was naturally led to the study of Comparative Philology, then beginning to establish itself as a science. Other and better-known sciences he studied attentively in the works of their leaders. He began to read books of philosophy.

He was also interested in music, and deeply interested. As a boy, he sang in the village choir ; and "when he was fifteen a friend's piano happened to be left in the house, and he was allowed to use it." He felt his way without a teacher until he acquired considerable proficiency. Later he made a thorough study of music, which became one of his chief interests and relaxations.

To complete the story of his boyhood, it must be said that at the age of fourteen he "experienced religion," he even led in prayer-meetings and taught in the Sunday-school, but of this incident in his life we know only the bare

fact. We do know, however, that the enthusiasm, if ardent, was not long-lived. It enabled him to listen attentively to the sermons in the little country church, but, when in one of them he was told that the greatest joy of the elect in heaven would be listening to the wails of their less fortunate friends below, his soul revolted against that sour and harsh theology, and he began to lay the foundation of his enduring reputation for atheism by avoiding the church where such dogmas were preached. Freedom of thought, we may be sure, was not highly esteemed in that Connecticut village, and at no time in his life did Fiske try to smooth over his divergence from public opinion. When this concerned itself with a matter of religion, a ready punishment was at hand in calling him an atheist.

His many studies and occupations left him, one would suppose, only very little time for exercise and amusement, but he

unwieldy, but this was not the case with Fiske. His mind was robust enough to assimilate and to command what his wide interests enabled him to acquire. The incident of the note-book crammed with dates illustrates his love of an orderly sequence of facts.

There is one characteristic of this wide and in its way thorough education that must not be forgotten: that is its literary quality. It was made up from books: what he knew of science was learned from text-books, not from actual handling or direct study of the elements. This was not the result of Fiske's choice of methods: it is merely the way in which, when he was young, the sciences were taught. Thus the general student's notion of, let us say, a problem in chemistry was as vague and impersonal as of one in algebra: the incidents were recounted in a book, this or that was supposed to happen with a curious shuffle of capital letters which

one had to learn by heart. Astronomy was taught in the same way,—one learned interesting statistics from a book, and yet besides the sun and moon knew only the north star,—and so with other sciences. There was this advantage, however: that much that was so taught has since been proved wholly wrong, so that those who were then slack in their studies have had so much the less to unlearn. But this is beside the question, which is the exaggerated value at that time of the printed page. This had so long been the sole medium of instruction that it inspired a reverence which it did not always deserve. Certainly the chemistry, for instance, that one can learn in a library is very different from that one can learn in a laboratory. This is not saying that there is no value in books, true as that remark may be about many, but only that we must recognize a difference between the period of Fiske's youth and the present in respect of educational methods.

In his case the knowledge he acquired of these remote sciences was of the nature of information, as one knows a country he has read about, but has not seen.

What has been recounted of the progress of his studies makes it clear that the usual preparation for college was something that he had early attained. When only thirteen, he was ready to enter Yale College, so far at least as familiarity with the requirements was concerned; but he was able to persuade his guardians to postpone this threatening interruption to his studies, and then to go to Harvard rather than to Yale.

What decided him was the reputation that Cambridge enjoyed for possessing a liberal atmosphere. It was supposed in remote regions that the Unitarianism of this college town insured perfect freedom for any thinker, and that it detested persecution as the persecuted alone can do. Such freedom the young thinker

yearned for. As has been said, he had by this time, with his reading, wandered away from the tenets of the little Middletown church, and he expected to find in Cambridge a place where he could work as he pleased with congenial companions. He appears to have been disappointed, for the college seemed to him "a terrible den of old fogyism." He said that he owed it nothing but the friendships he made there. Indirectly, however, it offered him a chance to pursue his own solitary studies without interruption, and of this opportunity he made the most.

A student who studied was, in those dark days, an object of great wonder and suspicion among his fellows. Rumours ran through the college of the enormous amount of reading done by the tall, gaunt, pallid young man with the great shock of red hair and the gold spectacles. It was also whispered, possibly as a perfectly unnecessary warning

against undue devotion to study, that the unhappy youth was an atheist. This evil fame clung to him for many years, and indeed had a distinct influence on his career, for it is true that some may rob the orchard, while others may not look over the hedge.

If a writer may with exaggerated modesty regard anything he has written as unread, place may perhaps be found here for an incident in Fiske's college career recounted in the *Atlantic Monthly* for May, 1902: "It will be remembered that until recently all the students of Harvard College were required, under severe penalties, to attend church twice every Sunday,—a rule which in their opinion sadly embittered the day. Fiske, who was averse to losing so much time, though he necessarily complied with the law, carried a book to church, and was detected in reading it. When charged with this crime, he readily acknowledged his

guilt, but at once complicated the question by a misplaced appeal to the liberality which he supposed to underlie an austere mien. He imagined that since Harvard College, as a fountain of Unitarianism, was regarded throughout the country as lamentably unorthodox, his offense would be readily pardoned by fellow free-thinkers. Greatly to his surprise, nothing of the sort happened; the authorities refused to wink at this bit of sacrilege. They displayed the utmost orthodoxy, and indignantly disowned any sympathy with Sabbath-breakers. He barely escaped rustication, and all he got from his appeal was his evil reputation as an atheist."

His bad luck with this nickname was also partly a result of the swift condemnation of the new thought which threatened so many old-fashioned ways of looking at the world that it was soon judged to be godless, and it was but a short step to call its adherents atheists.

Then, too, Fiske's absolute frankness and outspokenness attracted especial attention among a timid people like the Americans, who, above all things, dread any infraction of rigid conventionality and are shocked by the expression of individual opinion. The fact that he was no atheist was perfectly immaterial. He boldly and clearly asserted opinions that shocked the ignorant by their supposed blasphemy and the wise by their assumed inappropriateness. He did not play the game with the secrecy with which it was thought that the game should be played. In fact, he did not play any game. The average man would have assumed the appearance of conformity, but then he would not have been John Fiske.

It cannot be said that his college years were embittered by these idle accusations. He entered Harvard College in the summer of 1860, and graduated in the class of 1863, without academic

honors, but with a good preparation for more important ones. Already as an undergraduate he began to write, his early work appearing in the now vanished *National Quarterly Review*, the *North American*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*.

## II.

After leaving college, Fiske entered the Law School, which he left with the degree of Bachelor of Laws in 1865. He then entered a lawyer's office in Boston, and soon opened an office of his own. He was not, however, of the stuff of which chancellors are made. The loneliness of the young lawyer's office, it is to be feared, was most welcome to him as a secure retreat from interruption, and it was perhaps with a groan that he heard the knock of his first and only client. He was successful in the case, and received a fee for his work which set the legal profession in a far more alluring light than the scantily rewarded pursuit of literature. But his mind was made up : he turned his back on law, and determined to support himself with his pen. The importance of this decision was intensified by the fact that he had married while still in the

Law School, and was now a father. With all respect for an honourable profession, it may be said that one lawyer more or less is a matter of little moment to the world at large. There are always well-trained, intelligent, and eager young men ready to carry on the work of law, but there is a singularly small number of competent writers. At any rate, Fiske exercised a free choice, and gave up a profession that, if not odious, was at least unattractive to him, to devote himself to what was his real task, and one for which he was exceptionally well fitted. He lived his own life, but there were more than moments when he must have felt able to serve as a warning to young men who are disposed to despise the worldly wisdom of their elders.

With the intention, then, of conquering the world with his pen, Fiske settled down in Cambridge to the hard work that this perilous scheme demanded.

Some of the fruits of these early days may be found among his collected essays. Thus the article on "Mr. Buckle's Fallacies," which is reprinted in *Darwinism and Other Essays*, had appeared in 1861, when Fiske was but nineteen years old ; and it was certainly a very noteworthy piece of work for a writer of that age. His youth shows itself perhaps most clearly in the occasional solemnity to which Fiske never quite grew up, and in a little unnecessary loudness of affirmation ; but such things are trifles. What he clearly manifested was a good preparation for the handling of large subjects and a very competent mastery of the art of writing, as well as a remarkable maturity of mind. The discussion of Buckle's theories was the work of a ripe thinker. The many essays that Fiske wrote at this time only confirm this favourable opinion. They show wide reading — and the reading of a burrower, not of a skimmer — and trained thought.

All those years of careful study had filled his mind with a great mass of knowledge: there was hardly a subject of study that he had not investigated, and many of them he knew well. One might say that his special interest was in philology and folk-lore, were it not that he was planning a large book upon Jesus of Nazareth and the founding of Christianity. With these plans and distractions for his lighter hours, he was busily preparing the *magnum opus* of that part of his life, his *Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy*, which finally appeared in 1874.

It had been long preparing. In 1860, in May, Fiske had made acquaintance with the writings of Herbert Spencer, and in them and in Darwin's *Origin of Species* he saw the new light which filled him with rapture. He felt that he was one step, and one long step, nearer the comprehension of the universe. The application of this benefi-

cent illumination was to be made in various ways : its methods and significance were to be set forth in this Philosophy. In 1869 Fiske gave a series of lectures on Positive Philosophy at Harvard College, in which he expressed his dissatisfaction with that guess at the mystery of things. To the outer public who did not hear the lectures, and did not read them when they were later published in the *New York World*, a paper which at that time looked at life with an unjaundiced eye and actually so far forgot the functions of a newspaper as to interest itself in thought,— to this public, positivist, materialist, evolutionist, were but slightly varying terms of opprobrium for the dangerous free-thinker. Fiske was, they thought, a positivist, or, if that were inexact, he was all three, which was worse. At any rate, by treating of forbidden subjects he became an object of suspicion to those whose orthodoxy was firm. The

lectures on Positivism were followed by a longer series of thirty-five lectures on the Doctrine of Evolution, which were afterwards expanded into his book on the *Cosmic Philosophy*. They, too, appeared in the *New York World*. This was in 1871.

In 1870 he held a temporary appointment in Harvard College as instructor in history, and he received a regular nomination for the place; but in the Board of Overseers, which in such matters is generally compliant, his name excited sudden and violent opposition. What! an atheist, a positivist, a materialist, to be made one of the instructors of Harvard College! Are we to hand over our young men, at the most susceptible age, to insidious and dangerous sophists, who will misread history and teach heresy? etc., etc. The occasion, it will be seen, lends itself to eloquence; and eloquence of this sort carried the day. Fiske's nomination was rejected.

It was an extraordinary exhibition of the way in which men, chosen by picked voters, discharge what they imagine to be their duty. Their performance would seem strange, were it not that such things happen all the time.

This twinge of virtue was a heavy blow to Fiske, whose acquirements and ability were above the average, and who would gladly have devoted his life and vast power of work to teaching. It was a heavier blow to the college. No man was ever born with a greater power of imparting what he knew than John Fiske. His power of acquiring knowledge was considerable, and it is not to the credit of any man or of any body of men that a teacher of this calibre should be the one chosen for rejection. There is, however, this consolation : time brings its revenge,—slowly, to be sure, but not so slowly when one considers what calls are made upon it ; and, though at the moment they occur incidents like this

are depressing, they appear later simply ridiculous.

A year later, in 1872, it was thought that Fiske, now safely muzzled, might be made assistant librarian of Harvard College ; and this post he held until 1879, cataloguing and classifying books,—a most useful task, which he describes in his essay, “A Librarian’s Work.” A merely captious person, as distinguished from a practical man, might say that this was a singular misuse of Fiske’s abilities. The library was, however, lucky in having for consultation his great fund of information.

### III.

Meanwhile *Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy* had been put into shape and published. There are those in Cambridge who still remember one incident connected with its appearance. A number of the author's friends agreed to meet Fiske to discuss with him the principles that he had set forth in the two stout volumes, and one evening saw them assembled. They were all philosophers, and we know how philosophers regard the systems of their rivals. We know, too, the tender solicitude of even those of us who are not philosophers for the errors of our neighbours, and it is not difficult to imagine the scene. The discussion went on for some time: each one of the little band gave full expression to his opinion of the book and of what a philosophic system really should be, and at last, when they had conscientiously said their say, they turned to Fiske to

hear what defence he might make. To their surprise the object of all these attentions had no answer to make. He was sound asleep, and had not heard a word of their criticisms.

This book was of course Fiske's great contribution to philosophy. Any one who reads it now for the first time should not fail to study it along with Professor Royce's wise and sympathetic commentary in the complete edition of Fiske's works. The book is an exposition of what was then the new philosophy of evolution, and it began with overthrowing foes now dead and decorously buried, and it laboured to establish principles now generally acknowledged. Investigation has gone further, correcting, modifying, enlarging various points of view. Books of this sort are more or less like old editions of encyclopædias : they require making over every few years. A later revision Fiske never found time to give to this work of his youth, which in

its time had served a most useful purpose in teaching a large number of people what at least some leaders of thought were thinking and doing. The world was eager to know what was this evil spirit abroad, modifying the way of looking at the universe ; and they found here a most lucid and intelligible exposition of what they wanted to know. Nor was this all. The book is not a mere interpretation of Spencer's philosophy for the American public, a mere rehash of that and Darwinism. Fiske was not a mere translator : he illuminated the subject in a thousand ways, and contributed to it at least one markedly important suggestion in his theory of the influence which prolonged infancy exercised upon social development. A mind like Fiske's could not turn to a subject without bringing some new information or new way of regarding it.

That the book should have outlived its first importance is only natural. It

would be something strange if the world had made no advance in any given matter in a generation; for it is now more than thirty years since the book appeared, and many things have been discovered in that time, new thoughts have had their birth.

Those who are born in houses equipped with telephones, lit by electricity, can have but a feeble understanding of the joy felt by their fathers when they began to apprehend the full significance of the notion of evolution. That things grow without calling in the aid of special creation seems nowadays more than sufficiently obvious, but the extension of this new thought beyond the narrow limits of the kitchen-garden cost the world a mighty pang. The new lesson explained and simplified so many things. It brought order where had been confusion. The world unrolled itself in a new harmony as one vast whole. Every reformer feels the enthusiasm

which this new vision inspired. At last ignorance and superstition were to be expelled for good and all, everything was to be for the best in the best of worlds. The leaders of the Renaissance, those who greeted the beginning of the French Revolution as the foundation of a new era, had already known this strange enthusiasm, which is probably the greatest joy that the world knows. It is all very well to be young, but one cannot be too careful to be young at the right time.

The moment for the future Faust to catch is that when he sees the movement beginning, vast and full of promise, before it has been too closely examined under the microscope, tested in annoying and disconcerting ways by captious critics for whom nothing is good enough. In the days when Fiske wrote his book it seemed as if there were no good that would not flow from evolution, with the possible exception of wealth. Certainly,

no one foresaw then that now one of its favourite lessons would be the notion that might is right, and that it is simply our duty to bully those weaker than ourselves. This result of the teachings of evolution was not perceived by the early disciples, who saw ahead of them nothing but the uninterrupted performance of acts of altruism. They beheld only the glow of the dawn, and actually imagined that the great, cruel, stupid world was really taking a stride forward ! This optimism is seen in all of Fiske's writings from the first page to the last. It was one source of his great influence, for every one likes a cheerful guide ; and the man who believes that he is getting ahead covers more ground than one who growls in despair. By disposition Fiske was an optimist, and this way of looking at things was confirmed by the study of evolution in its fascinating novelty. He felt and preached the great charm of believing that some-

thing great was in process of accomplishment.

Even the most rabid optimist, however, can scarcely maintain that America counts among its boundless opportunities for the acquisition of riches the writing of books on philosophy. The establishment of a new religion has been shown to be not only very easy, but also a very lucrative business; but the "boom" still holds aloof from philosophy, which has to content itself with singing the charms of poverty. Moreover, when the philosopher has told us what he thinks, he has, as it were, shot his bolt. It can hardly be expected of him that he should sit down and devise a new system,—the philosopher next door will do that,—and his own system we have every opportunity of knowing. Fiske, then, had made his profession of faith. He had shown the way in which mankind might be expected to think, and why it should so think. There

seemed nothing more for him to say on that subject.

The *Cosmic Philosophy* was well received. It made Fiske's name well known at home and abroad, and found readers and admirers in all classes, from stray students in remote regions of this country to Huxley, Darwin, and Spencer in England. The acquaintance of these distinguished men he had already made in 1873-74 during a visit to Europe which he undertook for the purpose of making over his lectures into the book that we know.

## IV.

After the publication of *Cosmic Philosophy*, although, as we have seen, there appeared to be nothing more to say on philosophy, the world was not empty to Fiske. He wrote on various subjects as circumstances suggested, and found himself gradually drifting towards history. This had long been a favourite study of his. Indeed, it may be said to have been the study of his lifetime. In 1878 he was asked by that excellent woman, Mrs. Augustus Hemenway, his good friend and admirer, to give six lectures on American History in the Old South Meeting-house in Boston, where, partly under the influence of the recent centennial celebration of the events of 1776, an effort was making for a wiser study of our brief past. It was a moment when the whole nation was called upon to consider the growth of the last hundred years, and this period

of examination coincided with a distinct epoch in the economic history of the country, when, to state it roughly, luxury began to be common, if not vulgar, and, what was even more important, the United States of America began to assume importance among nations, ceasing to be a very respectable but remote and unimportant province. This was naturally the time when our past history that bore so agreeable fruit was the object of renewed interest.

Very naturally, then, Fiske was drawn into writing on American history, and the title of his first book on this subject, *American Political Ideas Viewed from the Standpoint of Universal History*, shows us how he regarded it. The book is of a most interesting kind, and the lectures which composed it were heard with delight whenever they were given. What characterised them was Fiske's wide knowledge and wise intelligence

as well as the perfect lucidity of his treatment. It is tiresome to be forever saying this of Fiske's work, but the fault is his: he was always learned and always clear.

The lectures were given in London, in the theatre of University College, in June, 1879, by invitation of Huxley and other distinguished Englishmen. They were very successful; and the next year he was summoned again to London to repeat them at the Royal Institution, where they were heard by larger and even more enthusiastic audiences. I remember telling Fiske, when I heard them in Boston, that one of them, the second, was the best lecture I had ever heard. He said, "Huxley told me it was the best lecture he had ever heard at the Royal Institution," and went on to tell me what efforts he had made to satisfy his audience. Later he told me how very well they had been satisfied, how the audience rose, some one pro-

posed cheers and more cheers, and there was general delight.

The lectures were also delivered at the Philosophical Institution of Edinburgh, again in London, and Fiske was invited to read them at the Sorbonne; but the season was late, and he was obliged to return to America, full of confidence. He had made a most auspicious beginning.

The field which Fiske began to treat in this brilliant way had not been left wholly untouched by writers. The glories of American history, the virtues of the American people, had been sung until modesty seemed to be the only one that was wanting. Faults were judged with equal impartiality. Those of the English were impressed with painful iteration upon the minds of all school children, to sweeten their lives with international hatred,—as if patriotism could exist only at the expense of reason. Such at least were the qualities of

many of the text-books that formed the basis of the general knowledge of our history. In Fiske's work there was no such narrowness. His knowledge was so abundant that the growth of the American people appeared in its right proportion as an incident in the world's history. For the reader there was something very flattering in finding with what important events he was connected, as if he suddenly found himself related to some old and famous family. What had been accomplished lost no interest and no merit by the explanation of the causes that led to it. The incidents were woven into a larger web, and so acquired a new importance which had not been before suspected.

Fiske's inspiring optimism delighted readers, and filled them with his own confidence. All the past was but the introduction to a far more glorious future. The last of the lectures in *American Political Ideas*, for instance,

reads and sounded like a speech at some great dinner: one expects a brass band to burst in with some patriotic song and a general tumult of cheers. This, to be sure, is an exceptional case, the tone is so clearly that of an address; but in his most sedate moments we see how unfailing is Fiske's cheery confidence in the future. He never doubted for a moment that everything would turn out for the best. That is what readers like. The novelist who brings his story to a happy end is the one they prefer, and they rejoice in the encouragement with which the optimist fills them. They smile perhaps at the petulance of the cynic, but, since mankind notoriously is seldom moved by reason and always by emotion, they pay attention only to the optimist whose words are like music to them. The main service of pessimism seems to be in inspiring remorse, which, besides being rare, is one of the least useful of human emotions. Fiske's

nature was made up of the most admirable serenity, which looked steadily on the bright side of things. This disposition shows through all his life and through all his work. We have seen it in his *Cosmic Philosophy*: it is even more conspicuous in his histories.

Of course, his hopefulness was far removed from that abnegation of reason which is known as jingoism. The jingo is necessarily an ignorant person ; and, if nothing else had preserved him from this folly, his knowledge would have done so. But from such imaginary charges Fiske does not need to be defended.

The *American Political Ideas*, while not precisely a history, showed in what lines history might be written, and how competent Fiske was to undertake the task. The popularity of the lectures made evident the eagerness of the public to listen to his expounding of the subject, which under his treatment was

interesting and full of instruction. Exactly in what way he should begin was a matter of some uncertainty. At one time he thought of compressing what he had to say into one volume, like Green's *Short History of the English People*, then he thought of publishing it in two stout volumes ; but the more he considered the subject, the more it grew under his hands, until finally it assumed a shape which it would have required a long lifetime to finish. It grew because from the first his method was liked. His power of teaching was so great that he could make the most complicated matters perfectly simple. There were no blurred or obscure passages for the reader to stumble over. All was clear ; and it was amazing how much he could make clear, what knotty points he could simplify. His mind was like a wheel moving with uniform velocity, capable of crushing flints or egg-shells with equal ease.

This lucidity we see in all Fiske's work, from the beginning to the end ; but it could only have been strengthened by his custom of reading his historical work in the form of lectures to people in many different parts of America. A man may publish a book that is thoroughly unintelligible, but one who reads his work to the public is quick to perceive what his hearers may not comprehend and he has the chance to correct it. Fiske, however, was clear without this enforced revision of his manuscript. His mind grasped events, and recorded them, not merely in their sequence, but also in their relation to one another, and they, being thus connected, held one another in place. He had a wonderful memory, but it was in a great measure the product of his wonderful habit of classifying, of systematising, of arranging every new acquisition, as some people always put away books, set papers in order, abhorring a litter.

His dignified, slightly ponderous style expresses admirably his equable, judicial mind, which worked with great uniformity, *ohne Hast, ohne Rast*. Indeed, in its placid strength Fiske's style might well remind one—*pace* the German nation—of Goethe's.

The encounter with his audiences, however, must have shown Fiske what the great public wanted to hear. He had not to conquer their indifference : he, as it were, took them by the hand, and began to expound even the most complicated series of events so simply and clearly that they were at once interested and eager to continue. His lectures seemed like pleasant walks with an accomplished teacher. Their popularity was great. It might have seemed that the old day of lectures had wholly disappeared, but there exist always a number of people who read more easily with their ears than with their eyes, and prefer seeing an author in the flesh to look-

ing at his photograph. They demand that what they are to hear shall be put clearly before them, so that they can grasp it immediately ; and Fiske wrote clearly before he ever thought of lecturing.

What began very modestly grew rapidly. In 1881 he gave some historical lectures at the Washington University in St. Louis, and three years later he received a regular appointment as non-resident professor of history in that institution of learning. His duty was to give every year a series of lectures. These he would prepare at home during the summer months; setting forth in the autumn with a heap of fresh manuscript, and giving lectures in many different places on his way to and from St. Louis.

In this way, between 1888 and 1893, he lectured five hundred and twenty-seven times on historical subjects, fourteen times on philosophy, six times on

music. It would, indeed, be curious to know in how many different places he stopped even in this small part of the twenty years of which he spent so large a portion in wandering from Maine to the Pacific coast.

He had discovered that it is only when used as a flavour in works of fiction that historical writing serves to support a man and a hungry family, but by this beneficent interposition of the lecture it enabled Fiske to live. It asked a high price, however,—enforced abstinence from work during the best working months, the fatigue of long journeys in the suffocating heat of the detestable railway cars, and strange gastronomic problems. Fiske was strong and cheerful. He never complained of the discomforts: he remembered only the advantages of travel. No sociable person such as Fiske was could go about so much without learning many things not to be found in books, without coming across new ways

of thought, new interests and ideals. He recalled rather the many sympathetic friends he made, with whom he shared his own wide interests and attainments. There must be those, for instance, in Portland, Oregon, who remember the afternoon when he read the article which he had prepared upon Schubert for the *Cyclopædia of Music*, illustrating it with the master's songs. At all events, Fiske himself long remembered that happy day.

Seeing a number of persons in different parts of the country tends to protect one from the ravages of narrow local prejudice. More than this, Fiske with his insatiable appetite for information picked up many odd bits of information, collected curious legends and traditions of great service to him. As for visiting places of historic interest, it requires no commendation. A battlefield explains itself better than a map, and so with the rest. Even from a car

window one gets a more accurate idea of a prairie than from any description in a printed book. Experience of this sort — for few Americans have known America so thoroughly as he — would have escaped him if he had been shut up in a bookish corner.

## V.

During the intervals between the lecturing campaigns Fiske was constantly at his desk. He sat down early, and worked till late. His great strength, his sturdy constitution, enabled him to work steadily many hours a day and for many days in succession. He had never been an enthusiastic lover of exercise, and year by year the amount that he could take grew less and less. From a slender sapling he grew larger and larger. Exercise became first difficult and then impossible ; but this only made his place at the desk dearer to him, and he worked only the harder. His uninterrupted good health was a treacherous friend, for it persuaded him that he could live in defiance of the need of the rest and exercise which he knew in theory to be necessary. Behind him was the spur of necessity, before him in some uncertain future lay the large lei-

sure when he should be able to carry out some of the plans of literary work that had haunted him almost from boyhood; but on his desk lay the call for immediate work. This call he never neglected.

The most prominent result of this work we behold in the series of histories which took the place of the modest handbook he had at first hoped to write. The volumes took their shape almost by accident, to meet the desires of the publishers and the interest of the public; appearing piece-meal, as chance directed, not in chronological sequence. They all, however, fitted the place they were to occupy in the general work, and that is the only question of the slightest importance. It was a large monument that Fiske meant to build, and though unfinished, it rose high enough to let us see the scope and significance of the plan that gradually formed itself in his mind. A work of that magnitude may be ex-

tells us, through Mr. Mead, that he enjoyed walking, riding, rowing, especially rowing, for which there was abundant opportunity at Middletown, lying as it does on the banks of the Connecticut River. He soon, however, became so enthusiastic a student—in his sixteenth year his average was twelve hours a day—that he must have abandoned these distractions. Later he studied even more intensely, and as long as he lived he was working almost all the time that he was awake; but his great strength and mighty constitution enabled him to do this with hardly a day's illness.

This sketch very briefly summarizes Fiske's early work, but it cannot fail to show the generous breadth of his intelligence and his love of learning. It is important also to notice that he was always busy classifying and co-ordinating what he had acquired. It was this orderly arrangement that gave him the

command of his stores of information. He had a wonderful memory, but he did not dump facts into it: he placed them where they belonged, and thus formed a great scheme of knowledge, very fully furnished, where he could put his hand, when he wanted to do so, on any particular fact.

The ideal of such a scheme was obviously omniscience and, as saints have yearned for perfect virtue, so Fiske yearned to possess all learning. It is not for the present writer to compare his success with that of even the lowest of the saints, but Fiske certainly made a very good start and at a very early age towards acquiring a fairly complete knowledge of what information had been stored in the best books, and to this knowledge he was always adding. One may fall short of omnipotence and yet be powerful, so one may fail of omniscience and yet be learned. Too vast a mass of information sometimes proves

pected not to be finished by the man who began it, but no man's work is finished.

The nature of the historian's task has been the subject of much thought and possibly more discussion in these later days; and, when the historians themselves differ about the secrets of their art, it ill becomes the incompetent outsider to display his ignorance by undertaking to settle the whole question off-hand. There is no one rule for the historian's guidance, his is a complex art. At any given moment he appears to be chronicling facts, or what may be taken for facts, in such a way as to attract the reader's attention to something else that the historian wants to impress upon him. If this is true of history, it is true of all literature and perhaps of all art: the writer, the artist, is setting his work in a new light, correcting in some way the work of his predecessors by addition or suppression or a different arrangement. For every generation there are some ques-

tions that seem settled, there are some things that seem finished, like pyramid building and epic poetry. Though no one can be sure that both of these diversions may not be the rage before the end of the century, they are not now engrossing the attention of students or of the general public. Everything else is in a state of flux. The fashions in poetry, in literature of every sort, shift and change, not by chance, not from mere wantonness, but from the desire to make a more precise statement than the last one heard. A man who can say a thing that is half true or true half the time already deserves a reputation as a sage, but the other half calls aloud for contradiction and the true half for a better statement.

In history, at any rate, it is easy to see the various methods that have been tried by successive writers under the influence of the prevailing modes of thought; and Fiske's work bears unmistakable evidence of the time it was

written, in the way in which every incident is recorded in its relation to its causes. The cast of the author's thought, determined by his study of the theory of evolution, stamps every page. There are no life histories in his volumes : the generation before him had given that picturesque work abundant attention. Carlyle had impressed the French Revolution on countless readers by his vivid portraits of the leading actors. All history he would have recounted in a handful of brilliant biographies. In time this process cloyed. The reader tired of this dramatic, melodramatic fervour, and the fashion changed. How much the great man influences his time, and how much his time influences the great man, is as far from settlement as the priority of hen or egg, and of about the same importance.

Living at the moment when vivid biography is the one way of conveying information, the historian inclines to

show us that, for example, the discovery of America is the result of the happy thought and heroic persistence of one man who wanders from court to court to persuade kings of the advantages of his wild scheme, proving that the world is round and that eggs can be balanced. On his voyage he alone has faith, and he stands on the lookout like the hero of an opera. We all know the method, and have felt its charm. Its success depends on bringing into vivid relief the admirable qualities of the hero, and it requires a very superior historian not to add a little to the height and difficulty of the obstacles his hero has to surmount.

To one trained like Fiske to see in the movements of mankind not merely the force of individual action, but also those greater impulses that sweep through all society, the work of the historian was different. It became his duty to show not merely what things were done and who did them, but to make clear why

they were done. Nothing shows this difference of the two schools more clearly than his massive work on the discovery of America. There he makes clear that this important event was not the result of the fortuitous choice of one able and persistent man, but a step for which the whole civilized world had been long preparing. The event is set in its proper relation to the world's history, and yet without detriment to the fame of Christopher Columbus. The man's insistence and energy receive full credit at Fiske's hands.

We see how the work was carried through by him in the face of the usual opposition: what is removed from history is the aspect of caprice, of accidental choice, which is exaggerated by insisting too earnestly on the individual portrait. To make that portrait vivid, it is necessary to diminish the hero's dependence on anything but his own indomitable will.

The fate of neither one of these methods of writing history is settled for all time: the pendulum will still swing, — some readers will yearn for perfect sympathy with the great men, and will suspect indifference in the writer who tries to show what influenced them. The absolute superiority of either will not be finally determined until the day when the question of the freedom of the will is settled. It only remains to be said that the method which shall be used at any given moment depends not on the choice of the author so much as on the general thought of the time.

Whatever the future may have in store, for the present, at least, Fiske's method gives great delight and abundant instruction. The broad general outlines which he draws are so clear, and, when he comes to filling in the detail, they have an air of fitting in their places so simply and naturally, that writing a history appears to be the easiest

thing in the world. Reading history is certainly easy when it is Fiske who is the narrator. His learning is sufficiently obvious, although no one ever knew everything, and his power of orderly arrangement was shown whenever he put pen to paper. What was still more remarkable was his absolute honesty, his earnest desire to be impartial. If at any moment there had been shown to him the unsoundness of what he had written, he would not have hesitated to destroy what was wrong, and to replace it with what was right. He cared only for the truth, and while few avow a preference for falsehood, there are varieties in the respect paid to the truth.

Such crystalline honesty as Fiske's is something rare, and no one of his qualities ever impressed his friends more deeply than this one. He said a thing because he thought it true, he never thought a thing true because he had

said it, and he was always glad to correct an error. This frankness and guilelessness he continually manifested in his daily life, where there generally prevails a shrewder worldly wisdom. Thus in the mishap of his reading in church, when he appealed to the august president of the college as one who would be sure to sympathise with his love of study and his indifference to religious formality, he displayed a simplicity that does not always mark the undergraduate at odds with the authorities, and this simplicity he retained throughout his life. He even carried it so far as to expect always to find the same directness in others, and frequent disappointment taught him no better. He was ever newly surprised and puzzled when he encountered anything else: it had the effect upon him of a painful discovery which threatened to disturb his cheery optimism. It did not, however, by any means uproot that quality in

him: it only modified his opinion of those in whom he found it. For them he had no worse epithet than "double-dealer," but that expressed very severe condemnation of those who said one thing and meant another.

The qualities thus indicated in Fiske, his surprise at finding the world full of complications, do not mark him as what is called a practical man; and a practical man he never became. His whole life was a long struggle with practical questions. He had a large family to bring up, and to accomplish this task, he was forced to work night and day; and the harder he worked, the harder he had to work, until even his great strength failed him, and he died under sixty.

This American history, as is well known, was his principal work. The volumes, as has been explained, grew from lectures; and the choice of the period depended on very slight matters,

perhaps the region where he was asked to lecture or the articles he was asked to write for some magazine. The subject once chosen, however, the book ran on smoothly, as a watch goes on wherever the hands are set. Always his main effort was not so much to add new facts as to arrange those already acquired in such a way that readers might understand why things happened as they did. This aim he did his best to make perfectly clear. Thus in his preface to *The Critical Period of American History, 1783-1789*, published in 1888, he says the work "makes no pretensions to completeness, either as a summary of the events of that period or as a discussion of the political questions involved in them. I have aimed especially at grouping facts in such a way as to bring out and emphasise their causal sequence, and it is accordingly hoped that the book may prove useful to the student of American history."

Three years later, in the introduction to *The American Revolution*, he says the same thing, affirming that his "design was not so much to contribute new facts as to shape the narrative in such a way as to emphasise relations of cause and effect that are often buried in the mass of details." This is indubitably one of the legitimate ways of writing history, and one which demands knowledge and judgment, to decide upon the relative importance of different events and to determine how they are related. It was this broad treatment that gave the charm to Fiske's histories,—this power of seeing things in masses, of seeing the forest without being bewildered by the trees. He had built himself a vast and orderly notion of the cosmos, and any subject that he happened to write about found its proportionate place in that large scheme.

Some of these histories dealt with times and events that had been im-

pressed to the point of satiety upon American readers. The foundation of New England, the War of the Revolution,—was there anything left to say on these well-threshed subjects? The Pilgrim Fathers, the heroes of the Revolution, had never been left for a moment quiet in their graves. They were always marching in processions to teach us some part of their virtues; yet familiar and trite as their story had become, told as it was by Fiske, it appeared in a new light, with an unsuspected significance.

He was himself surprised at the interest shown in his account of familiar events. In the preface of *The American Revolution* he says, “I was greatly surprised at the interest thus shown in a plain narrative of events already well known, and have never to this day understood the secret of it.” The reason is not so obscure to others. To Fiske it never occurred that his hearers and

readers had hitherto contented themselves with leaving bare facts lying about in their mind without trying to explain their connection. With him orderly arrangement was as natural as breathing. Intelligence, too, is in many ways so admirable a quality, it lends to a book so novel a charm, that it is hard to keep from wondering why readers are so tolerant of its absence. Fiske's intelligence so clarified and explained what he was writing about that the reader saw through his eyes, understood with his mind.

The merit of his exposition was felt not only by chance readers but by experts alike. Thus General Greene's southern campaigns in the Revolutionary War are so well recounted in Fiske's history that General Sherman, after reading the book, asked the author where he had received his military education; and General Sherman's good opinion was worth having. This was by

no means the only tribute from competent judges to the quality of his work. A subtle objection may be made that it was popular, and, inasmuch as there is nothing more popular than vulgarity, it may be assumed that a repulsive element has crept into everything that has acquired popularity ; but such specious arguments answer themselves. That Fiske's treatment of history was popular cannot be doubted. The most servile biographer will not attempt to deny that Fiske was guilty of this black crime.

There is no one way in which alone history should be written, and no method, of course, which ensures success without regard to the man who employs it. Those who disapproved of Fiske instinctively, tried to persuade themselves, and others, that it was because he did not work in the archives,—as if that work, undoubtedly useful as it is, were the only thing worth praise.

One is always glad of an excuse for hating one's kind ; and this excuse could serve as well as another, and always our condemnation of those we do not like is because they are not somebody else. Still there is something to be said in favour of the method which lets the store of information filter through an intelligent mind on its way to the reader. The most solid objection to this plan is the difficulty of finding the intelligent mind.

If the work in the archives was not what Fiske did, he worked indefatigably in collecting material, and to the material that he accumulated he added great stores of outside information. The story he had to tell he presented clearly, often eloquently, and always in such a way as to exercise the reader in the art of thinking,—the reader thought with Fiske. He knew none of the agonies of composition. What he had to say was steadily and carefully thought out and

steadily and carefully put down on paper, ready for the press. His manuscript rivalled the neatest work of the type-writer. Here and there a word was changed, but this was seldom. His clear thought made the expression clear.

## VI.

The most important of his histories is *The Discovery of America*. It certainly contains the richest mass of learning and deals with questions of greater scope than those of the rest of the series ; and the larger the subject, the more impressive was Fiske's treatment. Here he tells the story of the trade routes as it ought to be told, he discusses the doubtful case of the Norsemen with liberality, and, in a word, brings the discovery of America into its proper relation with the history of the world, which was his real task as an historian. His learning was most illuminating and various. I remember that, when he was correcting the proof-sheets of the first volume, I happened to have in my hand a complete synopsis of what was known about the early maps,—in a number of the *Globus*, I believe,—and I set about examining him, to see if he knew all there

was to be known about the subject. In case any omissions should be found, I was prepared, as I told him, to write a notice of the book in which it should be said that, while Mr. Fiske, to be sure, speaks of this and that map, it must have been only by some strange oversight that he neglected the other, familiar of course to every school-boy ; but to my great disappointment he knew them all.

When we talked of what one knows and what one does not know, he said, "The only thing one really knows is what one has looked up for writing about, and then has been over in proof-sheets : the rest does not exist." But in that remark he was unjust to his own capacious memory which recalled the date in which perhaps half the houses of Cambridge were built, the weather of every day of remote years, conversation in the past, and, most astounding of all, the name and disposition of every hand-

maiden who had been in the service of his household, the length of her stay, and the reason of her departure. To be exact, there was one person whose departure he could never account for. Though he knew it was of a harrowing kind, he could not recall the reason. When the reader reflects on the vicissitudes of domestic life in New England during a period of, say, thirty-five years, he will be able to appreciate the sturdiness of a memory like Fiske's.

It was, indeed, most extraordinary, and manifested itself in many odd ways. Once I was with Fiske at a private exhibition given by a very expert conjurer, who in the course of the entertainment offered himself for examination on various remote dates of modern history. He put his head into the lion's mouth. The rest of us, to be sure, had had vast sums spent on our education; but there were years in, say, the sixteenth century from which at the mo-

ment it was impossible for us to draw the veil. Not so with Fiske. It was all to him like the day before yesterday,—the magician had met his match. His memory too was precise, he could quote whole pages from Dickens, and quote them accurately.

His own solid text and the corroborative foot-notes attest his wide knowledge and eager interests more satisfactorily than can the affirmations of his friends. This book, *The Discovery of America*, bears witness to his careful study and to his freedom from prejudice. Take, for example, the discussion of the Norsemen and their alleged discovery of America. One may or may not agree with Fiske in his views of what is possibly an idle legend, but one must approve of the way he examines it with an open mind, without dogmatism. His treatment, too, of Americus Vespuclius is most thorough and intelligent. It is the work of a master who handles with

felicity a large subject. In this first volume Fiske was distinctly at his best. The magnitude of the questions involved called out his ablest work. His somewhat massive style well suits the dignity of the historian.

The volumes on the beginnings of New England, of Virginia, and of the Dutch and Quaker colonies, show what he would have liked to do for the whole country; but the subject grew on his hands, and soon became too vast for any one man's accomplishment. In one volume he spoke of what to some are still recent events in his *Mississippi Valley in the Civil War*. This book, as he is careful to say in his preface, in no way belonged to the general series which he was writing at the same time. It was rather produced in accordance with that mysterious principle which brings it about that most of the things done in this world are accomplished by men already busy with something else. It is

a military narrative of a certain part of the Civil War, with but the most meagre references to the general history of the time. The book rose into being from a series of lectures that he gave in St. Louis, in one of his annual visits, in aid of the fund for building a monument to General Grant. This subject very naturally suggested itself. Fiske was building his own monument to that distinguished leader.

It is a minor work, to be sure, but a very interesting one, with many captivating personal touches, such as his reports of conversations with persons concerned in those memorable events. Its main value, however, is the firmness of touch with which the story of complicated campaigns is set before the reader, so that he perceives the full significance of the whole movement and the meaning of each separate incident. The book was attacked for errors of detail, but we must remember that

Fiske had already said in his preface: "In treating such a subject, . . . the difficulties in ensuring complete accuracy of statement and perfect soundness of judgment are manifold. If my opinions are sometimes strongly expressed, they are always held subject to revision." They were often strongly expressed: the blunders that prolonged the war he points out with great vividness; but it is with equal vividness that he expounds the strategy that was hidden in what seemed a disorderly huddle of events, that he presents the progress of that great flanking movement. A great many people were in possession of the facts, but it would be hard to find anywhere so lucid an exposition of what the facts meant and of their relation to one another. Take, for instance, the chapters about Vicksburg, and notice how simply he points out why the capture of the city was important and what were the difficul-

ties that Grant had to face. Here is an illuminating paragraph:

“In the densely populated countries of Europe an army can often subsist upon the country through which it marches, but this was seldom the case with our armies in the Southern States. Their food and ammunition had to be brought to them, and it was seldom possible for them to move more than a few miles from the line by which such supplies were brought. As Wellington once said, every army moves, like a serpent, upon its belly; and the clumsiness of such kind of movement, under the conditions which obtained in our Civil War, may best be illustrated by a little arithmetic. The weight of food, ammunition, and other supplies required by each soldier averaged 4 pounds daily. A single wagon, therefore, carrying a load of 2,000 pounds and dragged over bad roads by six mules or draught horses, would supply 500 men, provided

it could make the trip both ways between the army and its base on the same day. If the army were one day's march from its base, so that the wagon must come one day and return empty the next, it could only supply 500 men every alternate day, or 250 daily. If the army were two days' march from its base, the wagon could only furnish supplies at the rate of 125 men daily, or 4 wagons to 250 men. To supply an army of 50,000 men, therefore, at two days' march from its base, required 400 wagons. Such an army ordinarily had at least 8,000 horses for its cavalry and artillery, and each of these animals consumed 25 pounds of forage daily, which made a load for just another 400 wagons. These 800 wagons were drawn by 4,800 mules or draught horses, which in turn required 180 wagons to carry their forage. These 180 wagons were drawn by 1,080 animals which were fed by 48 wagons, and so on. Adding the

figures, we find that for such an army as Grant had in Mississippi in December, 1862, nearly 1,100 wagons, drawn by 6,600 animals, were needed to keep it supplied at two days' march from its base ; while at three days' march nearly 1,900 wagons, drawn by 11,000 animals, were requisite. Such an army could not travel more than two or three days without shifting its base along the line of some railroad or river ; and obviously this movable base must be securely connected by river or rail with some permanent base established in a region entirely under Federal control. We thus get a realizing sense of the prodigious importance of railroads in our Civil War. Had the rebellion occurred a few years earlier, before our long lines of railroad had been built, its suppression by military means would have been physically impossible."—*The Mississippi Valley in the Civil War*, p. 191, *et seq.*

All this is so simple and obvious that, when our attention is called to it, we feel as if we had known it all our lives, and that our knowledge was shared by all our acquaintance; but, in fact, it is the ability to point out these things, so often forgotten, that thoroughly justifies a man in writing a book. This is but one example, chosen almost at random, of Fiske's constant habit. It seems as if he could have said nothing else, but those who have read many books will understand how rare is the gift of saying what one wants to know.

## VII.

Whatever may have been the errors of detail, they were, as Fiske said, subject to revision. Unfortunately, he died before he could examine anew the questions brought up, but those who knew him will feel sure that he would have looked over the evidence solely with an eye to getting the truth, not at all with a desire to exculpate himself if he was wrong. He was far above that low solicitude for himself: he loved the truth. If at any moment he had been convinced that his views about evolution, for example, were wrong, he would have abandoned them without hesitation, and he would have made his recantation as public as his adherance. He lacked that false pride which leads men to hug their blunders, to dread apologies as if they were proofs of cowardice. His friends knew his crystalline honesty, his lack of self-seeking, his perfect frank-

ness. His enemies, too, knew his frankness; and while we all admire the virtue, it seems to degenerate into violence when it expresses views we do not ourselves hold. His opponents would have sometimes preferred to have his dissent more hidden, but those who had any serious matter to discuss with him had no cause for complaint. He was intolerant only of prejudice and ignorance when they became dogmatic. On such occasions he did not disguise his emphatic disapproval where others might have hinted a possible divergence of opinion; but Fiske's mind did not work by hints. He was more inclined to strike straight from the shoulder, and the straight line in such matters is in no better credit than is the straight line in the new geometry.

In his notes to his histories his explanations and illustrations are frequently conversational in tone, and he gives very free expression to his views on

morals and politics, with little touches that reveal his tastes and character. They are often unconventional enough in matter as well as in manner, and so attract attention in a country where divergence of opinion is rare, where an independent thinker is looked upon as an eccentric, and the discussion of many serious subjects is put down either by the quiet boycott or by pressure. What he said was innocent enough ; but, when every one is whispering, a speaking voice sounds loud.

Yet, though he very often differed from the prevailing view, it was amiably and cheerfully and with unfailing optimism. He never despaired of the republic or of anything else. No one was ever less disposed to gloom, but his cheerfulness by no means made him approve of the faults or blunders of contemporary life : these he condemned, but he felt sure that time would infallibly correct them. Evolution had done

so much that it could not fail to do more. Fiske's hopefulness lay deep, his philosophy abode with him always and was manifested in all of his work. It was part of his nature. It fostered his natural tendency to arrange facts in an orderly manner and to explain as well as to narrate. We see it especially prominent in the four little volumes (*The Destiny of Man*, *The Idea of God*, *Through Nature to God*, and *Life Everlasting*) in which he discusses the most serious questions and the most unanswerable that man asks of life. They form almost a series by themselves. The one that expounds Darwinism (*The Destiny of Man viewed in the Light of his Origin*) is a model of exposition, a brief compendium that can hardly fail to delight a mature reader and yet would be perfectly clear to an intelligent child with a few definitions of the terms employed.

In the other volumes he treats subjects on which he had thought much.

They make us regret that he never found the time to write the life of Christ that had always haunted him as a possible and interesting thing to do. He had made some preliminary sketches in the early seventies, but these had soon been abandoned ; and Fiske never had leisure to keep up his studies in this subject.

He would have had here a most excellent opportunity to combine history and philosophy, and he would have written an interesting and important book. The subject especially attracted him both as an investigator and as a thinker ; and although the announcement of the book from his pen would have filled some with shivering horror, the book itself would scarcely have had so lamentable an effect. How deep was his religious feeling is now clearly manifest in much of his work, a great deal more testifies to his endeavour to be impartial in the treatment of historic ques-

tions, and we know what an amount of general information he would have been able to devote to throwing light upon the subject. More than this, he would have brought to the preparation of the book an open mind, a reverent spirit, and the absence of any desire to prove one thing or another.

A very complete notion of Fiske's attitude concerning the basis of religion and the belief in immortality may be got from the four little volumes just referred to. His simple nature was full of reverence, and the hopefulness of his temperament helped to make his message a cheerful one.

The hasty notion that evolution was a dangerous and atheistic theory had already faded from men's minds more rapidly than do most utterly groundless notions. What had been synonymous with all that is mischievous and false was now seen not to be so black as it was painted. The victory was won.

The victory indeed seemed to be won by both sides. Religion appeared to be more firmly established than ever, and the new philosophy had acquired general recognition. This is stating it too mildly, for the evolutionary theory, after making its way into physical science, had taken possession of the history of politics, of literature, of art, and finally was uniting even with its old foe, theology, in the study of early religions and the investigation of the Biblical books. While it had thus taken hold of advanced thought, it had also become known to the general public, who no longer feared its methods. To this agreeable harmony Fiske had greatly contributed. His persistent teaching had borne fruit, and the world under the instruction of many teachers had come round to an exacter comprehension of what evolution really was. Fiske's progress to the views he utters in these brief addresses had been to him only one

of natural growth, but to some who had observed less closely it seemed as if he had undergone a great change of heart. He himself felt that his later views were expressed or implied in everything that he had published. There was no cataclysm, no revelation of truth: he was merely better understood.

And he had certainly become better known. Ten years before he died, his reputation was established. His books and lectures had given his name great prominence. He spoke then with ripeness of years and abundance of knowledge, as a man of authority. Honours had begun to fall upon him. People wrote to him from all quarters of the globe with questions of many sorts about this world and the next,—a sure token of his eminence, but of all the forms artfully assumed by flattery perhaps the least alluring. After long obscurity his worth shone out. Honorary degrees were frequently bestowed upon

him: he received the tokens of general respect for a well-spent life. He was invited to deliver an address at the millennial King Alfred celebration in England. The recognition of his merit was general. In the last few months of his life he was especially happy in arranging his large collection of books on the walls of a new house that he was about to occupy, and where he hoped to continue his work; but this was not to be.

The hot weather of 1901 came on, and of the great heat Fiske had become intolerant. His sedentary life, the very strength which so long enabled him to work in defiance of hygienic laws, his vast bulk growing with the impossibility of exercise, his indifference to dietary laws,—all these things conspired to unfit him for resistance to the depressing heat. He was in Cambridge when it began; but he found himself less and less able to stand up

under it, and with one of his sons he started for East Gloucester to seek a breath of coolness on the edge of the sea. The change was useless, however. He reached the hotel, lay down, and in a few hours passed quietly away. This was July 4, 1901, in his sixtieth year.

## VIII.

This was, then, a life devoid of incident, as that of a writer may well be. It was one of practically uninterrupted intellectual work. He began by amassing information, and this he continued doing until his last day. It is the use he made of this information, and the use he made of the intelligence born with him that rendered his life important. In the course of his career he wrote on a great variety of subjects; for his interests were many, and at any time he would gladly have devoted himself to the further investigation of some branch of learning that he was compelled by other work to lay down. Early in his career he would have studied philology, comparative mythology and folk-lore, later the history of religions; but circumstances forbade.

How multiform were these interests one may see by turning to the volumes

of miscellaneous essays. These are all well written and full of fine scholarship. Some were written so long ago that they have become to a certain extent obsolete; but their method is not obsolete, nor has it become trite from over-use. In all of them we can see Fiske's mind working with its usual thoroughness, admirably judicial and temperate. There is a wide range of subject, for Fiske's interests roamed over a large space; and besides those devoted to science there are two or three on distinctly literary matters, like that on Longfellow's translation of Dante. For literature his busy life left him but little leisure; but he read what he could, and that was a great deal.

In the volume entitled *Darwinism, and Other Essays*, are two papers on Education, written in 1866 and 1868 respectively, when the question began to be discussed anew, with results that we can see; and Fiske's contributions are inter-

esting and, in their main principles, as well worth present study as when they were written. It is still true, even if at times it is forgotten, that "to teach the student how to think for himself, and then to give him the material to exercise his thought upon,— this is the whole duty of a university," and that "it is desirable that our opinions should be correct, but it is far more desirable that they should be arrived at independently and maintained with intelligence and candour. . . . Our motto should be, Think the truth as far as possible, but, above all things, think." Time has not yet made this lesson trite.

The essay on the *Oratorio of St. Peter* by Fiske's intimate friend, Mr. J. K. Paine, shows his interest in music as well as his knowledge of the art. The pages on Schubert, already mentioned, are such as only a music-lover could write, and he was really musical. While he was writing his *Cosmic Philo-*

*sophy*, he composed a mass and set songs to music not without success. As often as he could find the time, he would go to a concert or to an oratorio. When at work, he would stroll to a piano in another room, play a little, and then go back refreshed to his desk. In talking about music, he would go to the piano and illustrate what he had to say by what we may call practical quotation. In short, he was a man of many gifts, who could have made his mark in many different ways, while the course his life took was directed almost as much by accident as if he had been a hero of fiction. No hero of fiction was ever more richly endowed with virtues than was Fiske with the fruits of study. There are so many things that he could have done, but he was not free to choose what he would do : he had to do the work that was asked of him, and it gave him pleasure to do it, to his readers it gave pleasure and much more, so that after all the

blame must be laid on the shortness of human life.

With more leisure he would have done other things well, because, besides being well-equipped, he was by nature a born teacher ; that is to say, a man whose words were valuable not merely by reason of their accuracy, but on account of the illumination and inspiration that came from his mind, from his enthusiasm, from his interest in his work. It is this inspiring quality that marks the good teacher. The man who has it can make the Sanskrit alphabet interesting, while the one who lacks it will make a play of Aristophanes heavier than a French classic tragedy. Precision will not give this feeling,— if it did, we should draw emotion from the multiplication table,—the emotion comes from something else.

In Fiske's work it is not glowing enthusiasm that moves the reader, it is not eloquence in defending one side and

denouncing the other (for he is singularly impassive and impersonal), there is no appeal of literary art (though the art is there), no "fine writing." It is not a literary charm, but the personal intelligent earnestness of the writer, that moves us. We never think that this or that is well done, such or such a page is eloquent or touching, we are never compelled to admire the writer's skill. Far from it, his style is an almost transparent medium between his mind and whatever intelligence we may have. We look through it as we look through clear glass ; and, though it is true that glass is often admired for its glistening opalescence or for its purple tints, yet clear glass has its merits.

As has been noted by moralists, the style often indicates the man ; and in Fiske's case the statement is markedly true. In his comment on the *Cosmic Philosophy* Mr. Royce speaks of the absence of any break between Fiske's boy-

hood and his maturity, and this remark accurately defines a most noticeable quality of Fiske's character which is distinctly reflected in his clear, impersonal style. It impresses us by its sincerity, as he impressed those who knew him by his simplicity and sincerity, his most marked qualities. One does not notice whether his work has literary charm or not: one is simply interested and carried on by the smoothly running narrative. He interested every one, for the quality that all can appreciate is clearness. He saw things in masses, he lifted heavy weights easily, and with the strength he had the simplicity of a giant. He was devoid of guile. Till his last day he remained a great, simple, learned child. Other men are born with, or soon acquire, the art of grappling with this wicked world. Fiske could grapple better with a great pile of books. No one could look upon that beaming smile, into those clear eyes,

without seeing the man's utter honesty ; and while other men have been, and some still are, honest, few have kept the virtue so untarnished as did Fiske. With him it was not merely an agreeable trait, but an active quality that possessed him, that filled his whole being. To carry honesty to that pitch requires a simple and unworldly nature.

A man who neglects to exercise a very rigid control over his virtues obviously runs a risk of finding them overwhelm him, and Fiske was the victim of his own good qualities. Simplicity and sincerity are but a small part of the equipment of a man who conquers the world, although they have other advantages.

Like every hard worker, he left his work half done. His history of America he never completed, but the story will be told over and over again. Many a good man will recount the growth of the nation in one way or another, and at times the world will be able to read it

in an interesting form. Then they will know what so many of his contemporaries found in Fiske's historical work. At other times there will be an accumulation of details, a massing of documents, the busy collection of the materials of history, and scorn for the smooth recital. Those who enjoy that fashion will understand the feelings of those who look down with disapproval on Fiske's histories. To him, however, will always belong the credit of introducing into American history the historical method. He preached and practised this form of intellectual study, which is at present found to be the most fruitful, and the value of his teaching can be scarcely overrated.

To have left a mark in the history of philosophy and to have helped to expound the philosophy of history is a noble work for one life. His work, too, was of so high an order, so intelligent, so well prepared, that praise fits it very

easily. He did not forget his favourite motto,— *Vive ut cras moriturus, disce ut semper victurus*,— he studied as if he were to live forever. He was never overwhelmed by his learning. In managing his solid acquirements, his mind was nimble. He never had the flashing perception that saw at a glance and defined with a word. He approached a question with some formality, sailed round it with a certain three-masted dignity, not illuminating with a touch, but rather interpreting what he had carefully amassed about a subject and deliberately weighing all the evidence. In the treatment of the bulky mass he was perfectly at ease. He made no pedantic display of his learning because it was impossible for him to make a display of any kind. His learning illustrated and explained what he had to say. It formed part of his large way of thinking and looking at things.

The man that we see in his books is the man as he lived. There are writers

whose relation to their work is very puzzling. In the flesh they are only poor weak human beings, rather below the average in intelligence, so far as one may judge from a glance or even from prolonged examination ; but, when they once get a pen in their hand, they are new creatures, as different from their apparent selves as the butterfly from the crawling caterpillar. Those who are wise in their books are at times singularly devoid of wisdom in their lives and talk. Others again show themselves in their books as we know them, and to this class belonged John Fiske. He was what his books showed him to be, honest, simple, sincere. His absolute sincerity, his lack of guile, his freedom from moodiness, from uneasy vanity and self-consciousness, was always manifest. He was full of sympathy for others, and glad to demand it for himself. His indomitable cheerfulness he tempered with wisdom.

In conversation he was one of the most delightful of men. He had no small talk,—the paltry substitute for the real thing, the copper change of the nobler conversation,—but he had abundance of real talk. He would wind deep into a subject, bring to its discussion valuable matter from the stores of his learning, and would frame and follow most ingenious hypotheses with wit and wisdom. He was of so large and healthy a make bodily and mentally,—a strong mind in a strong body,—with such immense mental energy, that he was interested in many different directions. His writings show this, but his talk showed it even more clearly. There he indicated possibilities of future work that were compelled to remain mere day-dreams. To complain of that, however, would be to complain of life; and that is something Fiske would never have permitted. He thought better of the world than that, and we who look at his life have to

lament no promise unfulfilled, no opportunities wasted : rather we recall untiring energy and admirable performance. He began life with high aims ; and to these he remained constantly true, working steadily for thirty-five years, with unvarying devotion to his honourable task.

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The standard editions of the works of John Fiske are published by Houghton, Mifflin & Company, Boston, in twenty-eight volumes. The same house has also recently published by subscription a uniform edition in twenty-four volumes. In addition to these works a number of essays posthumously collected are published by the Macmillan Company under the title of *Essays, Historical and Literary* (2 volumes), and Ginn & Company have published two brief volumes of an elementary nature under the titles *How the United States Became a Nation* and *The Discovery and Colonization of North America*. The material in these last two volumes represents Mr. Fiske's prelude and conclusion to an abridgment of Irving's *Life of Washington* edited by him which was published in 1887 by Ginn & Company under the title *Washington and his Country*.

Especially worthy of attention is the Introduction to Mr. Fiske's *Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy*, written by Professor Royce for the new edition of this work, as published in the uniform edition above mentioned.

While awaiting the publication of the exhaustive biography which has been announced as in preparation, the reader must turn to periodical literature for further details concerning the life and work of Mr. Fiske. The articles thus to be found are numerous, but for the present purpose it seems only necessary to indicate a few of the more comprehensive titles. These are:—

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